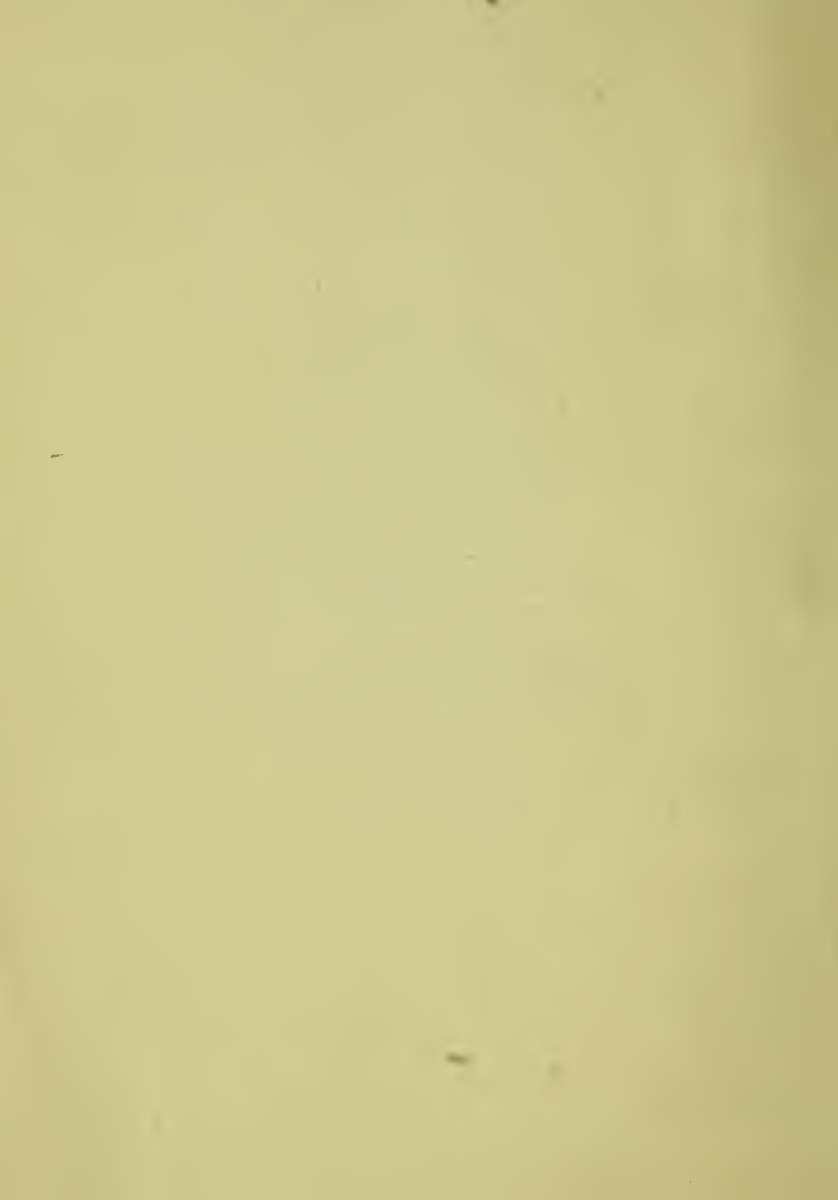


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Narcissus

PRICE TWENTY CENTS.





NARCISSUS,

A POEM

BY

SAMUEL WATSON WHEELER.

1885.



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PREFACE.

It may seem strange to some that at this late day the author should presume to take as the groundwork of a poem that which our greatest poets have ennobled in the sublimest verse.— the mythology of Greece. The author hopes that he may be pardoned if he has ventured upon ground that is sacred to those of the past. He has no excuse to offer for trespassing. While thinking upon the beautiful mythology of the ancients, involuntarily his hand felt for the strings of his harp—and this poem was created. If the strains lack the melody which the subject deserves, he trusts the world will overlook his folly in attempting to produce a poem worthy of the poetry of the nineteenth century.

Respectfully,

THE AUTHOR.



Printed for the Author at 406 So. 5th St., Camden, N. J.



NARCISSUS.

THE ARGUMENT.

ON the banks of the river Kephisos lay the beautiful Narcissus, mourning for his sister whom Hermes had taken beyond the river of death. The nymph Echo, seeing him thus, loved him; but Narcissus would not hearken to her words of passion and he saw only the face of the beloved one reflected back to him from the silent stream whereon he gazed. Weary with his sorrow he fell asleep and died. Then the heart of Echo was broken and she faded away like the dew of the morning. Upon the grave of Narcissus there grew a beautiful flower and it was called after his name.—*Greek Mythology.*

COME fairest Muse—blest Erato—and sing
A song of love; but give my harp to sound
A saddened strain, for now Narcissus dies!

'Tis afternoon: Apollo's golden rays
Fall slantingly through trees that line the banks
Of placid Kephisos. The tuneful breeze,
With trembling music, whispers to the flower,
That smiling nods and thus disturbs the bee
That wishes sweetness. Beauteous is the day—
Fit for the gods—a day of happiness!
Tellus has bared her breast and showeth here
A kingdom fit for palaces on high:
How green yon bank appears beneath the trees!
Each separate blade of grass doth sing for joy
And bends a low obeisance to the breeze!

Sweet is the breath of Summer; sweetly she
 Upon her throne of flowers here queenly reigns—
 Nature's fair virgin—and she reigns supreme!

See!—yonder is a wood that makes dense shade:
 Tall, upright, stand the trees in robes of green;
 The birds within the branches sweetly sing
 And with the loved one rear the little brood.
 Near to the edge, methinks, there stands a form:
 It is a nymph most gloriously fair:
 Upon the scene she gazes timidly,
 And seems to hesitate as if afraid—
 Like to the deer whose feet have 'scaped the hounds
 And come unto some shelter, doth she seem.
 Her eyes—so dark—are like the curtained Night;
 Her raven hair falls o'er each ivory limb
 And hides it partly from th' observer's gaze:—
 Like virtuous Cynthia, when the silent Night
 Has thrown her sable mantle o'er the earth,
 To screen herself from man's immodest eye,
 Into her darkened clouds she glides and shows
 But now and then the world her glorious form!

Her name is Echo: she it is who came
 From Tellus and the Air. (Proud Hymen joyed
 When all the bells rang out their marriage morn;

Juno—the queen of marriage—blest the day;
 And Cupid grasped his bow and swiftly fled
 Unto his mother. Venus kissed her child
 And, laughing, said his work was nobly done !)

Her form is grace itself: as she appears
 Her mother smiles more sweetly; all the birds
 From bush, and tree, and sprig, break forth and sing,
 If can be, more melodious; whilst the brook
 Babbles more musically as it seeks
 O'er whitened pebbles yonder silent stream.

She thinks at first alone she is—but no:
 Lying upon the bank reclines a youth—
 Is he asleep? she wonders—she will see.
 She timidly approaches, like the fawn
 That is afraid but must find out the cause:
 Slowly she comes: the breezes waft her hair
 Over her shoulders. Those pink, little feet
 Are much too delicate to bear the wounds
 The ground inflicts. Had she the wings to fly
 Methinks 'twere better—but e'en these would mar
 The fine proportions of her maiden form!

Near and more near: the distance grows much less:
 On light tip-toe she goes—now very near
 She stands and nearer hardly dares to go:

There at his back she is: she sees his curls
 Of shining gold—upon her knees she falls
 And o'er his shoulder leans: her heart beats fast,
 You see its palpitation on her breast:
 How still she breathes! her bosom scarcely heaves—
 Is he asleep? she wonders—no; a tear
 Steals down his cheek and falls upon the earth.

“Narcissus!” cries the nymph—and as she speaks
 Each bird holds back his song to hear the strain
 That musically breaks upon the ear—
 “Narcissus—it is I—thine Echo; do not mourn!
 Each tear thy blue eye sheds pierces my heart
 As if it were a dagger—look at me!”

The youth starts at her voice but does not turn
 His face to her. Beneath, the river flows
 Silent and still: no wavelet mars—’tis still—
 Smooth as the mirror: there the trees reflect
 Their gorgeous colors, and each leaf is seen
 As if it were there hanging to the tree!
 It seems another world: now floats a cloud
 Upon the nether azure, and its form
 Is white as snow—so silent and so pure
 It slowly sails along as if with wings!

“Ah, youth!” she cries, “shall I ne’er gain thy love!

Why mourn the loved one—am I not as fair?"
 With this she upward springs and stands between
 Him and the stream below. O, all ye gods
 And goddesses! never was beauty seen
 So rare and lovely as the one that stands
 Before the youth Narcissus!——But with all
 His heart is cold unto her; still the tears
 Fall one by one adown his cheek—no one
 Save his own loved one can his love procure—
 And she is *dead!* "Ah, me!" he cries aloud,
 "And I am doomed to weep! Come, cruel Death,
 Take me e'en now unto the Stygian shades!"

"And still thou art unmoved!" the sad nymph cries.
 "Thou knowest not how deep the arrow is!—
 God of the bow, why did ye give to me
 A hopeless love!"—the tears fall down her cheek—
 "Canst thou, Narcissus, never love but one!
 Look at the stream below: behold the face
 Of her whom Hermes came for—see! is she
 As fair as I?—look and be satisfied!"

Narcissus gazes on the placid stream,
 The placid stream gives back the features fair—
 The golden hair—the mild blue eye—the form
 So near perfection!——"O!" Narcissus cries,

Come back my only love! Come to my arms
 And not e'en death shall separate us more!
 Methinks I see you as you talked with me—
 I almost hear the music as it came
 From those sweet lips! Ah, I remember well
 How oft we played together; how we laughed
 When from the lips of mother fell the kiss
 Upon us both! Loved one are ye at peace
 In those Elysian fields?—and do ye smile
 As ye were wont to smile? Are ye not sad
 To think Narcissus stays alone to mourn?—
 O, cruel Hermes! how could ye take one
 And leave the other mourning!—Is your heart
 As hard as adamant!—

“O, sister fair,
 I cannot tarry here—my heart doth break!
 But, gazing now upon thy beauteous face,
 I am some comforted: the world recedes,
 And I look forward through the mists that shroud
 My mournful life unto the time when he—
 The god of death—will separate the chain
 That binds me to the earth, and I will then
 Be borne across that dark and dreadful stream
 To yonder plains beyond, where we shall meet
 To dwell forever in Elysium.”

The youth is silent: still his eye is fixed
Upon the stream—no more the bright tear falls.

Still sweet in her despair the nymph doth gaze
As if the youth possessed the power to charm.
O! who can e'er describe a hopeless love!
Against a tree she leans: a pearly tear
Hangs on the long dark lash, making it seem
Like to the dewdrop on the trembling flower
Before Apollo's smile lights up the world
And kisses off the tear!——Now Echo speaks,
Sadly and slowly: “And you scorn my love!
Narcissus, do not hate me! I would give
The world to gain thy love! My throbbing heart
Reflects only thy features: there you reign
A god supreme, whether you love or no!”

The sun still shines with glory: all the earth
Is fair and lovely: through the trees a ray
Of sunlight pierces and rests on that head
Of golden curls: those mild blue eyes forget
Their fixed intent, and the long lashes droop
Until they close the eye: a sweet, sad smile
Dwells near the mouth—and now Narcissus sleeps.

“My loved one sleeps,” speaks Echo, in a voice
Of sweetest melody—so hushed and still

You scarcely hear it.—“I will rest his head
 Upon my bosom.” Softly now she falls
 Down at his side, and with a hand as light
 As the still summer’s zephyr, lifts his head
 Close to her bosom: there the golden curls
 Remain enthralled.—Narcissus knows it not;
 His thoughts are far away to that blest land
 Where dwells the one he loves.——Echo’s sweet voice,
 Low and most clear, bids him to sweetly sleep:
 “Narcissus, now I claim thee as my own;
 Though, when awake, you keep me far away,
 In sleep I now will love thee. Rest, sweet one,
 Nothing shall harm.”

From off his ruby lips
 She steals a kiss; and as she bends her head
 A maiden blush uprises, and her face
 Glows with her passion like the dewy rose—
 “Sleep, loved Narcissus, let the gentle breeze
 Fan with its wings thy face and softly tell
 Thee in thy slumber that the nymph still loves
 And will protect thee. O, sweet sleeping one,
 Did ye but know how throbs this broken heart
 For love of thee, ye could not thus refuse
 And scorn her so! Now weary are you dear?

Rest then your head upon this snowy breast
And it will give you rest."——

Thus doth she love :

Now mourning for his love ; now satisfied
That she can love e'en if he does not give
His love to her : now kissing those sweet lips
As if they were her heaven ; and now with tears
Whispers his name—despairingly—thus loves,
Thus weeps, thus mourns the broken-hearted nymph.

The afternoon now wanes : nearer the sun
Comes to the west horizon—and the youth
Still sleeps in silence ; still the mournful nymph
Shows her despairing love. The birds still sing,
But not so joyously, as if the night
That was approaching warned that rest was near.

Apollo's car sinks slowly ; fleecy clouds
Above his resting-place change to the hues
Of glory as he sweetly goes to rest.
The zephyrs play more roughly ; now a leaf
Is tost on high, which, quivering, downward falls
Into the river : from the zephyr's kiss
The placid river turns to rippling waves :
Cooler the day grows as the Night with haste
Spreads o'er the earth her mantle. Silence reigns.

Still doth the nymph caress the sleeping youth :
 "Ah sweet one," crieth she "your lips are cold!
 Methinks 'tis time you were awakened—see!
 Each bird leaves off its song and seeks its nest—
 Narcissus! love! awake!—the evening comes
 To shed its silent dews!" (Narcissus rests
 All undisturbed—yea, with the lasting rest
 That Hermes gives!) "Awake!" sweet Echo cries
 In wild alarm. She sees his eyes uncloze
 And they are glassy.—

"Ah, my love is dead!"
 She sadly moans. "O, Hermes ye have torn
 My heart in twain! I was afraid the dream
 Would pass away and leave me all alone.
 My love has gone where I can never go—
 Across that dreadful stream no one will give
 The boon I crave!—I cannot die!—I live
 Only to mourn!"

Night falls upon the scene
 And still the sad nymph mourns. The night winds join
 With awful melody her mournful strain :
 Darkness prevails: no star shines through the gloom,
 But blackened clouds roll fiercely o'er the sky.
 Through the dense gloom a messenger from Jove

Descends and buries underneath the sod,
 Close by the stream, the lovely, youthful form
 Of young Narcissus. Sad the night-winds sing
 A requiem for the dead.

At last the Night

Rolls from her breast the clouds of opaque gloom,
 And gives the reign to Day. Aurora, fair,
 With lovely face of rose, in yonder East
 Unbars the gates of light. Her blush reflects
 E'en in the West. Then Phœbus' horses prance
 In golden trappings to the car of Day :
 The god grasps tight the reins and forth he comes
 Gorgeous and grand ! At sight of him the earth
 Most sweetly smiles ; the birds resume their songs.

Upon the bank where yesterday the form
 Of young Narcissus lay a mound is seen :
 It is his grave.—Beneath, the river flows
 So calm and still ! Upon the bank of green,
 Filling the air with perfume, bloom the flowers ;
 But on the mound of him who sweetly sleeps
 One fair flower blooms alone : the golden ray
 Now for the first time kisses off the dew—
 'Tis the NARCISSUS.

Where is she who mourned ?

Hush!—hear ye not that voice, that saddened strain
That lingers o'er his grave? 'T is Echo's voice,
Sweet as Æolian music. All the night
She pined away; and as the morning breaks
No sign of her is seen. Only her voice
Can now be heard—'t is sad and sorrowful.



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